

HOW GINA GALLO IS KEEPING THE E&J GALLO WINERY ON TOP

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"I'm just going to get you something to eat, like a little nibble, a mini-burger or something," **Gina Gallo** tells me with a grin. As we sit down for an interview in the MacMurray Vineyard Estate's main house, we're secluded from the nearby commotion of 3,000 bustling guests at the annual Taste of Sonoma, the only time the historic ranch is open to the public.

"Now we do a proper slàinte!" Her eyes flash as she offers me a toast of Rosé bubbles from J Vineyards, the Healdsburg-based family winery that is a recent Gallo acquisition. "Salute!," we chime together and clink glasses. "You have a little Irish in you, don't you?" Well, no, why? "You're the only one who knows that when you do a salute, a slàinte, you have a sip."

Born into the legendary winemaking family pioneered by her grandfather Julio and great-uncle Ernest when they were just teenagers, after a family tragedy (their parents died in a murder-suicide) left them orphans, Gina Gallo's own career blended the commercial and creative sides of the business. She studied business psychology at Notre Dame de Namur in Belmont, CA and worked in Gallo's sales department, then enrolled in UC Davis's Viticulture and Enology program and apprenticed under Gallo's longtime winemaker Marcello Monticelli. With her brother Matt as grower, she masterminds Gallo Signature Series.



Gallo makes unabashedly popular wines. One of the most creative marketing companies in any industry, E&J Gallo has created distinct brand after distinct brand, fighting the perception that low-cost wine is a commodity. They pioneered use of creative ad campaigns on television within the alcohol beverage industry. Following the American Dream in the depths of the Great Depression, the two brothers built the largest family-owned

winery in the world on the back of their own hard work. While many other large family concerns such as the Mondavis have been swallowed by large corporations, Gallo remains a family business.

And while the family's roots are in Modesto, Gina Gallo is a dominant player in the tight-knit Sonoma wine industry. At the series of events that make up the annual Sonoma Wine Country Weekend, including gala bashes and culminating in a September 6 [Sonoma Harvest Wine Auction](#) at Chateau St. Jean that raised a record \$4.5 million for local charities including the Fund the Future youth literacy initiative, Gina and her husband, the dashing and theatrical winemaker Jean-Charles Boisset (always clad in his signature red socks), were omnipresent and always the center of attention.



The night before the auction, the Sonoma winemaking community came together for a preview dinner at the historic Buena Vista Winery, which Jean-Charles, scion of France's fifth-largest wine producer and head of the Boisset Collection, purchased in 2011. Guests toured two historic 1860s buildings from the original Buena Vista Vinicultural Society, one of which houses an almost medieval Wine Tool Museum and an impeccably 70s-style Bubble Lounge (photo below right), and were entertained by The Count, a jovial local actor portraying Agoston Haraszthy, the Hungarian count and onetime San Diego sheriff who founded the winery in 1857.

Buena Vista, in fact, is a testament to the blend of modern winemaking and historical preservation – as well as to the blend of craft and commerce. The two original buildings survived the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, but were condemned after further damage from the 1989 Loma Prieta quake. After the purchase, Boisset had structural engineers devise a unique "core drilling" retrofitting plan that drilled vertically into the old stones,



inserting steel rods coated with resin, none of which is externally visible. Throughout the property are historical and educational signs that emphasize Buena Vista's history. And while the wines now produced by Brian Maloney pay tribute with names including "The Count" and "The Sheriff," the philosophy behind them is very modern.

In the acknowledged shadow of neighboring Napa, Sonoma's cozy wine industry has to find innovative ways to market its brand. The county boasts impeccable wines with distinctive character, like membership-based Ram's Gate's 2012 El Diablo Chardonnay or the 2013 Martaella Vineyard Pinot Noir from Benovia (another family-based enterprise, whose name combines those of married proprietors Joe Anderson and Mary Dewane's fathers). But events like the [Sonoma Wine Country Weekend](#), the development of destinations like Boisset's Buena Vista, with its Wine Tool Museum, Bubble Lounge and the Count (and Jean-Charles's red socks), an [initiative](#) to make Sonoma wines 100 percent sustainable by 2019 (with 70 percent of the county's winegrowers already certified) and social media campaigns like wineblogger Amy Lieberfarb's [#SonomaChat](#) – the 21st century version of Ernest and Julio Gallo's early adoption of mass media in the 1960s – play an important part in helping to make the charms of these great wines vivid to the consumer.

While Gina told me that her marriage to Jean-Charles (below left) does not entail any winemaking collaboration between the two families, both based elsewhere but in love with Sonoma, it's clear that family is central to her and to her company.



Is there a kind of collaboration, on your level between your style of wine and what your husband is doing?

So separate. So different. I was just talking about it yesterday with someone. So, family is family. Work is work, it's not about family. But I grew up in a family business.

I don't know how anyone could really shut the door. Even if I didn't grow up in a family business, I think I would go home and say, "God, I had a hard time with this and this situation." And who are you going to trust more than your family? You want to talk to your husband. Your partner. It's so intertwined.

For us though, as far as work, business is extremely separate. We love wine. We love food. Absolutely, we collaborate on certain things.

What I think is important is you have that passion. You create, you believe. The other thing that is very important when creating wine, and what I do, I love it and I do it well, I don't think about myself. Okay, I see this. I feel it. I'm creating. For something that's not even in me. You have to. Creating wine, it's artistic, right? You're an artist. It creates a space, it creates a pleasure.

We all know quality. Quality's done, forget that. We all know how to create quality wine, then it's just stylizing. What do you want to create? What do you want to do? How do you do it? For me, it's hard because I have a style. I would be much more Bordeaux. I'd be much more European. I'd be much more higher acid. That's not America's style, in general. That's 10 percent of the world, and everyone wants to probably be there, not everyone wants to be, but it is there.